

Childhood Visions

By Clare

"Congratulations! It's a girl!" the Thunderian midwife said as she handed the young mother her newborn child.

Nyxie, a female of the Cheetah Thunderians, gazed into her daughter's tiny face, which bore the distinctive eye-masks that were one of the characteristics of those born of the Cheetahs. The child's hair was fine and blonde; the black spots visible on Nyxie's hair and that of other adult Cheetah's would not start to appear for about a month and they wouldn't become fully established until she was at least three or four years old.

"She's beautiful," Nyxie whispered, gazing at her husband. Fleetfoot had been with her throughout the birth, but he still found it hard to believe that he and Nyxie could have made something so precious between them.

"I'm sure she'll make us proud," Fleetfoot said, feeling his little daughter's fingers instinctively grasp his thumb. "You never know - she might even become a Thundercat one day. It's about time the Cheetahs had that honour again . . ."

Nyxie knew what he meant. There hadn't been a Cheetah in Cats Lair since Old Dashfelix passed away at the age of eighty-nine, by which time he no longer lived up to his name. But, right now, she had other things to think about . . .

The midwife, a mixture of Lion and Panther by the look of her - she had grey skin and long red hair, characteristics of both races - looked at the young family fondly. No matter how many children she delivered, the sight of the newborn with his or her parents always gave her a feeling of deep satisfaction. She had no children of her own, so she had made it her duty to see that those of her fellow Thunderians entered the world safely. Now, she had just one more task to do.

"Do you have a name for a girl?" she asked.

Nyxie thought for a moment, remembering a night when she and Fleetfoot had gone through a long list of names for both boys and girls. But, now that they had a daughter, she concentrated on the latter - Catrosa, Felyra, Amber, Lachatte, Cheetara . . . Nyxie paused, savouring the sound of the old Cheetah name - Cheetara, a name which seemed to say "don't mess with me" to anyone who dared try it on with the girl who bore it.

"I think . . . Cheetara," Nyxie said at last.

"Splendid," the midwife said. "It's a very fine name with a history to be proud of and . . ." She paused as something startling occurred to her. "Nyxie, does your family have a history of . . . unusual abilities?"

Nyxie shook her head, unsure where this was leading but filled with forebodings about what it could mean for her daughter.

"Did any of your immediate family ever mention having visions?" the midwife went on, seeing Nyxie's anxious and puzzled face.

"Now you mention it, yes. I had an aunt who sometimes . . . sensed things before they happened, but no-one from my generation has anything like that . . ."

She did not want to believe it. She knew visions - a crudely developed Sixth Sense - sometimes occurred in female Cheetahs, but she also knew they could be dangerous if not properly controlled. Her aunt had been driven to suicide because the "Gift" as she called it had often proved to be more of a curse than a blessing - and it generally made its bearer hypersensitive to extra-sensory stimuli. "No!" she told herself, clutching her child tightly. "That's not going to happen to Cheetara!"

In time, Nyxie and Fleetfoot settled down to life as a young family. To Fleetfoot, his little daughter was a source of constant joy; as the eldest of six brothers, he had never seen a small girl at close quarters before and Cheetara fast became the most precious thing in his world. But Nyxie was troubled by a constant worry - should she try to explain about the "Gift" or wait until Cheetara had a vision naturally and then do her best to deal with the aftermath?

Then, during the summer Cheetara was eight years old, something happened which forced Nyxie's hand.

It started when she decided to go for a picnic by the River Felis with a childhood friend and her family. Indira of the Tiger Clan had two children, a son named Tygra who had been born a few months before Cheetara and a lively three-year-old daughter, named Siberia but known to her family as Sibby.

Sibby sat between her mother and Nyxie while Cheetara and Tygra played "chase" on the banks of the river. Already, Cheetara was an exceptional athlete for her age - although she would not achieve the gift of Super-speed until puberty - but she wisely held back during games with Thunderians of other races to allow her slower companions a fair chance of winning. Only when she was with her fellow Cheetahs did she allow herself to reach her full potential, something which gave Nyxie and Indira much to comment on.

"Your Cheetara's a very fair-minded young lady," Indira observed from where she sat.

Nyxie nodded in agreement. "She could easily have caught your Tygra a couple of times, but she let him get away," Indira went on. "And that's the mark of a future Thundercat, if ever I saw one . . . which reminds me - have you heard they're supposed to be initiating a new Thundercat later this year?"

"No - who is it this time?" Nyxie was always excited by the appointment of a new Thundercat; there were only two ways a Thunderian could achieve this coveted status - being the son or daughter of someone who was already a Thundercat or showing what the Code of Thundera defined as "exceptional strength of character". Since Thundercats-by-birth required no formal initiation save a public acknowledgement of their status within a year of birth, this had to be a commoner who had risen to the rank of Thundercat.

"From what I'm told, it's a young boy called Panthro - fourteen or fifteen," Indira replied.
"Apparently, he and a group of friends got caught up in a Mutant ambush and he was the one who . . ."

But what the young Panthro had done to earn the honour of being made a Thundercat was something Nyxie would not learn from Indira. Before the latter could complete her sentence, Tygra ran up to the two women, panting for breath.

"Mother . . . Nyxie, . . . Cheetara . . .!" Tygra gasped when he had recovered enough to speak.

Her maternal instincts on red alert, Nyxie ran in the direction Tygra indicated with Indira and her children following in her wake. They found Cheetara lying on her side, her eyes open - she was alive, but she showed no signs of responding when Nyxie attempted to shake her awake. Instead, she just lay on the ground, mumbling what seemed at the time to be nonsense but would later prove to be the first prediction of the Great Destruction.

"The . . . world . . . will . . . die," she murmured as Nyxie helped her to her feet. "The world . . . will . . . die. The world will die . . ."

She collapsed, senseless, in her mother's arms and Nyxie instinctively knew that her worst fears were being realised. Cheetara had the "Gift" and it remained to be seen whether or not she would have the strength or the will to keep it under control.

"What's wrong with Tara?" asked Sibby, who couldn't quite pronounce the *ch* sound in Cheetara's name.

The four of them - Nyxie, Indira, Tygra and Sibby - were in the waiting-room at the Thundera City General Hospital, where they had rushed Cheetara after she collapsed. Right now, the eight-year-old girl was undergoing tests to try and rule out any serious illness, but Nyxie had a sneaking suspicion of what they would find. And that, she knew from what happened to her aunt, was something potentially far worse than any illness. Nonetheless, she decided she had to be brave for Sibby's sake.

"She's just . . . not feeling well," Nyxie explained, hoping Sibby would accept this explanation. "So the doctors are doing some tests to find out what's wrong . . ." She tailed off, wanting more than anything to talk about her fears but not daring to express them openly.

At length a young nurse, who appeared to be of the Jaguars since her name-badge read "Jageta", came to see Nyxie and the others. "Well, there's nothing physically wrong with Cheetara," she said brightly. "In fact, she woke up just as we were examining her. But," her toned darkened, "we did find something that I suspected might be the cause . . ."

"What?" Indira asked, clutching Sibby to herself protectively. "What did you find?"

"Evidence of unusual brain activity," Jageta explained. "I've only seen it once before - and that was in another Cheetah . . ."

Nyxie's heart thudded as she read her daughter's medical report - high activity in the perceptual regions of the brain. "We tested her again after she came to and her readout was normal then," Jageta said. "So I'm assuming - or rather I'm hoping this was just a one-off, a freak occurrence."

"Maybe," Nyxie said sceptically. "Or maybe she's starting to show signs of having the "Gift". She did say some stuff about the world - and I assume she meant Thundera - coming to an end . . ."

"Could be," admitted Jageta, although she clearly had a few doubts about this theory. "But at least we know she didn't fake it - these prove that much." She tapped the pile of medical notes with Cheetara's name on them.

"You think I should . . . tell her?"

Jageta looked at Nyxie sympathetically, wishing there was something she could say that would make Nyxie's task any easier. But there was nothing; no amount of training could help her to make such a crucial decision when it concerned someone else and her child. "That is one thing I can't help you with," Jageta explained at last. "Only you can decide . . ."

"Nyxie, she's got to be told!"

Nyxie and Fleetfoot were in the midst of a furious argument, the one insisting that Cheetara be told she had the "Gift" and the other vehemently refusing. "And how do you propose I do that?!" Nyxie demanded hotly. "Sit down with her and say "you might have visions sometimes and they might make you faint"?! She's an eight-year-old girl, for crying out loud!"

"I just think it'll get harder as she gets older. And what if one of these visions takes too much out of her? Have you thought about what that could mean?"

Nyxie whirled round, determined to stand her ground against her husband and stick to her decision to tell Cheetara when she felt the girl was ready to handle it and not before. "Of course I've thought!" she retorted. "And I don't think it's fair to burden her until it's necessary . . ."

In her room, Cheetara turned her radio up full blast so that the barrage of pop music from M.E.O.W., a popular station among young Thunderians, drowned out the sounds of the argument raging downstairs. Ever since the events by the river, her parents had done nothing but argue and, from what she had overheard, she knew it had something to do with her.

"But why should I be making them argue like that," she wondered out loud. "They never used to fight before . . ."

Leaving her radio still blaring, she left her room and crept halfway down the stairs. Perched on the middle step, she caught her mother's voice saying something which made her catch her breath.

"Fleetfoot, you knew this could happen when we married. You *knew* the "Gift" was in my family," Nyxie was saying. "And it means we'll have to get her checked over to make sure she isn't a high-risk case."

Something told Cheetara that this concerned her and, more specifically, it concerned the unexplained incident by the river. It frightened her - the words "high-risk case" were enough to tell her that, whatever the "Gift" was, it wasn't exactly good news for the one who had it. Trembling, she walked down the last few steps and walked in on her parents in mid-argument.

"Mommy? What's wrong? Why are you and Daddy fighting?"

Nyxie and Fleetfoot - the latter was in the middle of berating his wife for not having the courage to tell Cheetara earlier - turned to look at their daughter. She looked like any other Thunderian girl, dressed in a sky blue tunic dress and with her spotted flaxen hair falling gracefully around her shoulders. Only her trembling lip betrayed the truth; she had evidently heard the argument and, frightened by all the shouting, come seeking reassurance that all was well and they would always be there for her.

Nyxie sighed, finally bowing to the inevitable. "All right - I'll tell her," she said reluctantly.

She took Cheetara by the hand and they went outside to sit on the swing set. Nyxie sat still for a moment, trying to find a way of explaining the "Gift" to Cheetara without alarming her. But it ended up being Cheetara who made the first move.

"I have the "Gift", don't I?" she said in a dull listless voice.

Nyxie was taken aback, wondering how her daughter had managed to find out when she had spent the last eight years trying to shield her from it. "H - how do you know about it?" she stammered.

"I heard you and Daddy talking about it - and I saw those things when we were by the river . . ."

Nyxie gasped as she realised Cheetara knew more than she had expected, but she suppressed her amazement and decided the best thing to do would be to let Cheetara talk about it in her own words.

"What did you see?" she asked gently, hoping Cheetara would be able to remember enough to tell her.

"Thundera - but not like it is now. It was horrible, Mommy; the planet was gonna explode so we all had to leave . . . I saw all the Thundercats leaving Cats' Lair and - and I was with them, grown up - one of them yelled, "Come on, Cheetara!" . . ." Cheetara paused for breath, struggling to make sense of the events she had just described.

"Mommy, why did I see those things?" she asked, instinctively, as all children do, turning to her mother for comfort.

"I think it must have been your Sixth Sense," Nyxie explained. "You see, Cheetara, there is a . . . power some females of our clan have - half-Cheetahs sometimes have it too, but it's rarer among them. Anyway, this power enables its bearer to . . . "see" stuff other people can't, stuff invisible to the eye."

"But how can I see stuff if it's invisible?" Cheetara demanded, beginning to lose patience.

"I didn't mean you see it with *these* eyes." Nyxie pointed to her eyes with her fingers. "I meant there is another kind of eye inside your head - and that's how you were able to "see" those things."

"Kind of like a memory? But how come what I saw showed me grown up?" Cheetara added after a moment's thought.

"Well, it is sort of like memories - but it's also different. For one thing, you can "see" stuff you never experienced yourself and . . ."

"I can see stuff that hasn't happened yet!" Cheetara added. "D'you think that's what my vision meant - something in the future?"

Nyxie nodded slowly, recalling how her aunt had told her the first vision she had was of a pile up on the main Thundera Expressway - two days before it actually happened. But there was

something else Cheetara needed to know, something which could affect how she coped with this for the rest of her life.

"Cheetara, listen to me because this is very important," she said seriously. "The "Gift" is a mixed blessing - remember how you fainted after your vision by the river? Well, it happened because it made you very tired. Cheetara, you must learn to control these visions and never, ever call on them deliberately - unless you *really* need to. Even then, you should prepare yourself beforehand . . ."

Cheetara sat sucking on her hair and thinking over what her mother had said. "I promise," she said at last. "I won't do anything silly - but what if you and Daddy start fighting again?"

"Don't worry - we're not going to split up because of you. I just wasn't sure you were ready to know, but, now I know you were, it won't make any difference, now will it?"

"No, Mommy," Cheetara said, glad she at last knew the truth and could prepare herself for next time.

"Good girl. Now, let's go back inside - and turn that radio down!" Nyxie laughed.

Cheetara laughed with her. She knew nothing had changed really and life could go on as it always had. The only difference was that she happened to have the "Gift".